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TESTING REVIVAL

By David Streater

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God because many false prophets have gone out into the world.” 1 John 4, 1.

The news of strange happenings in a number of churches has been heralded by the media as an outbreak of revival. According to “The Times” report, “... *a religious craze that originated in Canada and involves mass fainting and hysterical laughter has crossed the Atlantic.*” As far as we can tell, not having been present at one of these churches, it appears that part of the congregation loses control of itself to such a degree that services have ended in relative chaos with people falling on the floor, and in one particular instance, with a man roaring like a lion. [*Ed. this article refers to some of the extra-ordinary phenomena associated with the Toronto Blessing*].

The claim is made that this is the work of the Holy Spirit and that those who are personally involved find their experience of God greatly enhanced. Of course, phenomena such as these while rare, are by no means isolated in the history of the Church especially at times of religious excitement.

During the Evangelical Revival in the middle of the eighteenth century, some of the preachers found that there were strange manifestations under their preaching. John Wesley himself at first believed that this was a special work of the Spirit, but later actively discouraged such behaviour at which time it stopped. Jonathan Edwards assessing the consequences of some of the phenomena associated with the Great Awakening in America at the same time, adds words of caution concerning their spiritual reality.

The question must be asked as to how we should consider such matters? Must they be accepted uncritically on the grounds that such experiences are at a time when Christian matters are disregarded by the world at large? Such manifestations, which are certainly neither dull nor tedious, might make those outside take notice.

That would be a pragmatic approach but the issue is too serious simply to bow to expediency. A positive critical approach is necessary, for we would neither wish to deny the work of the Holy Spirit on the one hand, nor to doubt the possibility, or desirability, of revival on the other. But we are not left without warnings on the subject from the Lord Jesus Christ and the apostles of the dangers of false prophets. It is to the Scriptures that we must turn for that guidance and in particular to the First Epistle of John.

Valid Questions

John the Apostle is writing pastorally, to protect the flock against insidious false teaching. At the beginning of the fourth chapter, the apostle issues a very clear warning that spiritual claims are to be tested which denies the idea that to ask questions concerning such phenomena is unspiritual.

The fact is that Christians have tasted how gracious the Lord is and felt something of the ‘powers of the world to come’ and this can leave them open to be influenced by what is claimed to be spiritual. However, not all experiences come from the Holy Spirit. It is actually wiser to question their validity than just to accept anything on the grounds that any questioning must grieve the Spirit.

There is a metal which is called 'fools gold' and unless an acid test is applied to it, may well pass for something which it is not. The teachers who were leading the churches astray when John wrote denied the incarnation. In the realm of the spiritual, like the world of the physical, not everything is genuine which claims to be. It is therefore more mature to question some things than simply to believe everything which is why the apostle cautions the brethren not to "believe every spirit."

Dangerous Deceptions

The spirit realm works largely through man's imaginations by promoting the deceptive idea in one form or another, "you shall be as gods". And the reason for not believing every spirit is that "many false prophets are gone out into the world". The prophet is one who speaks for another. The true prophet speaks on behalf of God by the power of the Holy Spirit, now encompassed in the Old and New Testaments. The false prophet represents a false seducing spirit which leads away from the Word of God into an entrapping realm of psychological trips.

In the Old Testament this was an acute danger when prophecy flourished. There had to be tests. In Deuteronomy 13 v1-5 there is very clear instruction of how the people of Israel were to react to such false prophecy. Even though a sign was prophesied and it came to pass, if it led away from the revealed will of God in the Law, then both the prophet and the sign were to be rejected. The people were being tested to show if they would remain faithful to God's revelation.

The fact is that there can be false signs and wonders in the New Testament and Christians are not to be led astray from the simplicity of the Gospel. The warning of the Lord Jesus Christ in the little apocalypse of Matthew's Gospel (24 v3-28) stands out starkly, "For false christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to deceive, if possible, even the elect" (*compare Paul's comments in 2 Thessalonians 2, 9-10*).

Crucial Tests

What are the tests to be applied? The first test is **doctrinal**. In verse 2 John says that tests must be applied to what is happening against the doctrine of the incarnation which he affirms to be true. How does it match the fact that the Son of God actually took human nature? Of course, that means we must test all claims of spiritual experiences by the great doctrines of the New Testament such as the atonement, the resurrection, and the ascension. How does this claimed sign relate to the great theological truths which have been received on the sure warrant of Holy Scripture? We speak of the two natures of Christ, human and divine, as well as the doctrine of the Trinity. If the signs and wonders do not correspond with the received truth then they should be regarded with great caution.

The second test is **practical**. It is a test of holiness in keeping the commandments of God (see v24 of Ch 1). The Lord Jesus warned the disciples that it would be by the fruit of their lives that false teachers would be identified. If there is no fruit of scriptural holiness then such teachers must be rejected. The recent scandals of the 'televangelists' confirms this point!

There is a third point which is no less important. **Does the world receive such teaching?** If it does, it is a distinguishing mark of error (vv 4-6). The world recognises power when it sees it, but it is the weakness of the Gospel, and of a crucified Saviour which is the power of God. And this the World rejects. But the crucial question is what is revival?

Revival

It is certainly true that revival in the past has been distinguished by some strange phenomena, but it would be wrong to believe that strange phenomena automatically indicate revival. As we have stated, John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards both ministered during times of revival in the eighteenth century, and were much used by God, but both had very definite views that strange phenomena, even when genuine, were really peripheral to the work of grace.

A current idea which has gained ground since the Sixties is that the more worship is unstructured and informal, even to the point of chaos, the more the work of the Spirit is evidenced. Such an idea needs to be challenged by the Scriptural evidence. In Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, the apostle clearly indicates that this is not so.

In the passage in 1 Corinthians 14, where we gain a glimpse of the first century church at worship, Leon Morris writes in his Commentary on verses 32-33 (*Tyndale Press*):

Just as those speaking with 'tongues' had the ability to keep silent when they chose, so it is with prophecy. It is not an irresistible divine compulsion that comes upon a man...Prophecy is a means of divine illumination, but a prophet may keep silent. This arises, says Paul, from the fact that God is *not the author of confusion, but of peace*. If the prophets had no control over their *spirits*, gone would be any prospect of an orderly assembly. But Paul sees a guarantee against such disorder in the character of God. Such a God will produce peace, not *confusion*...(p 200)

What then is revival? Perhaps one of the best definitions comes from Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones who expressed it in his inimitable way:

It is an experience in the life of the Church when the Holy Spirit does an unusual work . . . primarily among members of the Church...Suddenly the power of the Spirit comes upon them and they are brought into a new and more profound awareness of the truths that they had previously held intellectually...They are humbled, they are convicted of sin, they are terrified at themselves...And they come to see the salvation of God in all its glory, and to feel its power...they begin to pray. New power comes into the preaching of the ministers, and the result of this is that large numbers who were previously outside the Church are converted and brought in. (*Give Him No Rest*, E Hulse, E P p 10)

If we use Dr Lloyd-Jones as a starting point, there are two features which are common to all true revivals. The first is the **overwhelming sense of God's presence** which creates a deep sense of awe, and that includes reverential fear of God's Holiness and Majesty. The second, and consequent upon that 'aweful' experience, is **a deep convicting sense of sin**, which leads to repentance towards God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Of course, the length, degree and intensity of these convictions vary from person to person.

But Jonathan Edwards demonstrated from his experience in Northampton, Mass. that not all who professed repentance and faith proved to be genuine. Signs such as great emotions, great effects on the body, prostrations and much excitement might occur and those involved might continue for a while but then fall away.

In spite of these difficulties the effect of a genuine revival is deep and lasting, refreshing the believers, and awakening sinners. Such revival always has a profound effect upon society and its morals at large. If we compare the moral state of England in the early part of the eighteenth century to its state one hundred years later, there is a world of difference. And this was true of Wales after the 1904 Revival. For true revival cannot be contained within the body but it overflows into the world around it, acting as salt and light.

Conclusion

The claims which are being made today of a new revival must be tested to ascertain whether such claims are genuine or not. That is a scriptural task which is laid upon all Christians by the apostle John. There is not only a right of private judgement but the duty to prove all things. The fact of falling prostrate, laughing uncontrollably, weeping, or roaring like a lion is no guarantee that this is from the Holy Spirit of God.

We take no pleasure in believing that what is being experienced is not a true revival. We wish it were but we cannot simply grasp at straws. The issues are too serious. We believe that when genuine revival occurs, while there may be some strange peripheral phenomena, essentially we shall see people becoming very aware of the presence of God and coming under conviction of sin leading to deep reverential awe, not least in worship, and a wholesale turning to Christ Jesus and him crucified and resting on his righteousness alone for pardon and peace with God. We believe that there will be evidence of deep repentance and sins long since committed will be confessed and restitution made. Such activity of faith, hope and love will not be restricted within the four walls of the church but will flow out into every area and activity transforming society. Such a hope has been deferred for a long time but that is no reason for giving up hope that our God will revive his work in the midst of the years.

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